California
Farmland Conversion Report
1998 - 2000

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Executive Summary

Urban development increased by 30% over the prior update. Vineyard development helped offset irrigated farmland losses in some areas of the state.

California land use conversion between 1998 and 2000 reflected the strong economy and specific agricultural trends of the late 1990's. Statewide urbanization as mapped by the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) exceeded 90,000 acres for the first time since 1990-1992. Prime Farmland accounted for 19% of the 91,258 new urban acres, and other irrigated farmland categories comprised an additional 8% of new urban land.

The FMMP biennial mapping survey covers approximately 90% of the privately owned land in the state (44.5 million acres) in 48 counties. Land use information is gathered using air photos and other information, and combined with soil quality information in a geographic information system (GIS) to produce the maps and statistics.

URBANIZATION

- 91,258 acres were urbanized
- 29% of urbanization occurred in Riverside & San Diego counties.
- 19% of urbanization occurred on Prime Farmland.

The southern California counties of Riverside and San Diego accounted for 29% of new urban acres in 1998-2000, and five counties in the Sacramento and San Francisco Bay areas (Sacramento, Contra Costa, Santa Clara, Sonoma, and Placer) accounted for an additional 28%. This was the first time central California counties comprised such a large amount of the state's new urban land.

Most new urban land was residential and commercial. Golf course communities were developed or expanded in all of the rapidly urbanizing counties, and were relatively common statewide. Fifteen additions to golf course areas were made in Riverside's Coachella Valley. Other urbanization examples included recreational facilities such as Legoland in San Diego County, landfill expansions, schools, parks, hospitals, sewage treatment plants, and transportation facilities.

Irrigated farmland, particularly Prime Farmland, was affected by this urbanization in the large majority of the actively urbanizing counties. In some locations, large proportions of the new urban land occurred on former irrigated farmland. Examples include San Joaquin County, where 2,037 out of the 2,555 new urban acres occurred on irrigated farmland (80%), and in Merced County where the figure was 84% (874 out of 1,040 acres).

Aside from urbanization, other factors caused increases or decreases in the amount of irrigated farmland in California. Farmland losses occurred due to conversions to low-density residential uses, ecological restoration projects, or long-term land idling. Counties with more than 10,000 acres removed from irrigated farmland categories included Riverside, San Diego, and Kern. Anticipated urban development, unavailability of irrigation water, soil issues, and economic factors are likely reasons that land has gone idle in any given location.

FARMLAND

- 29 counties had net decreases in irrigated acreage.
- Among the remaining 19 counties, wine grape growing areas accounted for 71% of increases in irrigated acreage.
- Wine grape acreage in California now exceeds raisin and table grape acreage combined.

Land was also converted from native vegetation or formerly idle farmland to irrigated uses. The San Joaquin Valley and Central Coast each experienced conversions of this type totaling more than 40,000 acres between 1998 and 2000.

Vineyard development accounted for much of the new irrigated farmland. Five wine grape counties (Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Sonoma, Santa Barbara, and Napa) had net increases of irrigated land totaling 42,775 acres during the period. Orchards, strawberries, ornamental crops, and baby carrots were the other agricultural uses increasing in specific counties. A large majority of the land brought into irrigated agriculture during the two years (68%) did not qualify for Prime Farmland.

FMMP conversion statistics for all types of land use change were higher in 1998-2000 than in 1996-1998. The figures represent a continuation of trends—increase in urbanization rates and major investment in vineyard development—that were noted in the 1998 map update.

Combined data from the 1996-1998 and 1998-2000 updates indicate that California Prime Farmland acreage declined by more than 77,000 acres, and all other irrigated categories except Unique Farmland lost an additional 47,000 acres. Unique Farmland had a net gain of 42,000 acres during the four-year period. Overall the state gained more than 161,000 acres (about 252 square miles) of urban land and lost 82,512 acres (about 129 square miles) of irrigated farmland in the 1996 to 2000 timeframe.